



THE SHERWOOD ANDERSON
FOUNDATION

Anderson Foundation Awards Corso Fiction Prize

Editor's note: Paola Corso, winner of the Sherwood Anderson Foundation Award for 2000, has given us permission to publish this account of her life and writing career to date:

Paola Corso was born in an industrial river town outside of Pittsburgh when the steel mill was the region's primary employer. Her paternal grandfather, a crane operator at the mill, was so determined not to miss his shift when his 1936 Chevy stalled that he got out and walked to work, leaving the car on the railroad tracks. Her maternal grandmother, who worked at the family fruit store, was just as hard a worker. Nonni had her daughter get married on Thanksgiving because a holiday was the only time she would take off from work.

Though Paola was raised in a working-class background, she began to write in the fourth grade after her family moved across the river. Since she hadn't yet made friends, she spent a great deal of time alone in her room scribbling down poems and starting a mystery novel inspired by the Nancy Drew books she had read.

While there was no reason to believe anyone in her family would aspire to make a living as a writer, Paola found herself thinking again about it in college. She worked for the student newspaper at Boston College while pursuing a joint degree in political science and sociology. She also cited the influence of John Mahoney, a professor of English Romantic poetry who heightened her appreciation for literary work.

After graduation, Paola decided to travel, living in Denver where she studied publishing and then spending three months in Europe. Much to everyone's surprise in Pittsburgh, she moved to San Francisco where she got a degree in community organizing from San Francisco State University. She wrote grant proposals for non-profit organizations and eventually gravitated back to journalism, working as an editor at a weekly paper before freelancing for The San Francisco Examiner.

She pursued her career back to the East Coast, eventually winding up back in Pittsburgh where she became a staff reporter for her hometown newspaper, The Valley News Dispatch. She was able to walk to her Nonni's at lunchtime. It was then over fried eggplant or ricotta cheese spread on a slice of Italian bread that she got reacquainted with her Italian American upbringing. At the same time, she realized that she had grown tired of the daily grind of reporting city council meetings and began to try her hand at creative writing. Paola explored her Sicilian background and then social issues. With playwright Michael Winks, she co-wrote

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and produced dramas about homelessness and hunger, which garnered attention from USA Today and support from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

In 1991, Paola moved to New York City and began writing fiction. Her story collection, "Giovanna's 86 Circles," which explores how young girls and childless women make magical leaps in order to find alternative ways to give life in a seemingly barren region of the Rust Belt, was nominated for a Pushcart Editors' Book Award. She was fortunate to be selected as an instructor in the Bronx for the National Endowment for the Arts Writers Corps, a federal program to introduce literary arts to underserved communities.

In 1993, Paola co-founded the National Writers Union Community Writing Project at a women's shelter where she taught creative writing and literature in small groups to teenage mothers. She co-edited the project literary magazine, *See It Through*, and co-organized participant readings. As a graduate student in English at The City University of New York, she studied under English Professor Felicia Bonaparte and fiction writing instructor, Linsey Abrams. With their guidance, she completed her novels, "The River in Me" and "San Procopio," and won three writing awards.

Paola explores her Italian roots, folklore and magical leaps in her writing. "The River in Me" is set in the 1960s along the Allegheny River where the Italian American narrator's brother drowns in high waters. The novel flashes back to the 1936 flood in Pittsburgh as well as to drought-stricken Southern Italy during the 1920s. "San Procopio" is about a New Yorker who is determined to overcome obstacles which prevent her from burying her mother in a Southern Italian village where she was born. The novel flashes back to the post-World War I peasant struggle for land reform and violence between Socialists and Fascists that killed her grandparents.

Her fiction has appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. She was the winner of Voices in Italian Americana's Aniello Lauri Award for Creative Writing, the American Italian Historical Association Award for Italian American Studies and recipient of a literature fellowship from the Vogelstein Foundation. Yet the journey to publication of her novels has been arduous. Agents and publishers have uniformly praised her literary work but believe it is a difficult sell in the marketplace. Paola hopes that her winning the Sherwood Anderson Foundation Award will boost further interest in her work.